

THE MANUAL NOBODY HANDS YOU

A practical guide for anyone who has watched a parent decline...
and wants to give themselves the best possible chance of a different future.



by Brent Milne

I Watched a Parent Disappear a Little at a Time. Here's What the Research Says I Can Do So My Kids Never Watch That Happen to Me.

Most of us over 50 have seen it up close. A parent who used to run the household forgets the stove is on. A father who once had an answer for everything starts asking the same question three times in an hour. You tell yourself it's just age. Then you catch yourself wondering, quietly, whether it's coming for you too.

Here is the part that almost never gets said out loud in a rushed doctor's appointment: it often isn't "just age." In 2024, the Lancet Commission on dementia reviewed the global evidence and concluded that around **45 percent of dementia cases are potentially preventable**. Not cured. Not treated. Prevented, by addressing 14 specific, modifiable risk factors — things like physical inactivity, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, diabetes, obesity, smoking, social isolation, and depression.

That is not a hopeful guess. That is where the peer-reviewed research already sits. It just rarely survives the trip from a medical journal into a twelve-minute checkup, because there's no line item for "walk more and sleep better." So we're laying it out here instead.

Why This Seems to Hit Us Harder Than It Hits Other Countries

Look at how the last seventy years actually happened in America. We built towns where you cannot walk to buy milk — just a five-lane road and a grocery store a mile and a half off. Every errand became a car errand. We started eating things assembled in a factory instead of grown in a field, not because we're careless but because we're busy and processed food is fast and cheap. And we started sitting. A lot. Some of our parents spent the last decade of their lives in a recliner with the television on from breakfast to bed.

None of that is a character flaw. It's the water this country has been swimming in since the 1950s, and almost nobody chose it on purpose.

Now compare that to a Japanese grandmother who eats fish most days with rice, vegetables, and green tea, and walks to the market because that's how the neighborhood is laid out. Or an Italian grandfather with his olive oil, sardines, and tomatoes, walking to the square each evening because that's where his friends are. Those aren't magic cultures. They're cultures where brain-protective habits are baked into ordinary life instead of something you have to schedule around a full-time job.

Researchers at Rush University built something called the **MIND diet** — the Mediterranean pattern with the brain-health elements turned up: leafy greens, berries, nuts, olive oil, fish, beans, whole grains. They tracked 960 older adults for close to five years. The people who followed it most closely showed a rate of cognitive decline equivalent to being **7.5 years younger** than the people who followed it least. That's years of brain aging bought back with groceries.

What's Actually Going Wrong

Four processes drive most of the decline, and every one of them responds to what you do:

- **Inflammation** builds up and damages neurons.
- **Myelin**, the insulation around your nerve fibers, thins out, so signals slow down and misfire.
- **BDNF**, a protein that acts like fertilizer for your neurons, drops.
- **Blood flow to the brain decreases**, so the regions that need oxygen get less of it.

None of those are a verdict. They're processes. Here's what pushes back on them.

The Big Two: Do These First

If you only take two things from this whole article, take these. They carry more weight than everything else combined.

1. Trade your steady walk for intervals

The technical term is high-intensity interval training, or HIIT, and it sounds like something for 25-year-olds in a CrossFit gym. It isn't. Researchers at the University of Queensland put volunteers aged 65 to 85 through supervised interval training in an ordinary gym — 72 sessions over six months. The group doing HIIT showed measurable improvements in hippocampal-dependent memory that were still detectable **five years later**, even for people who hadn't kept up the exercise.

The shape of it never changes: 20–30 seconds of effort hard enough that you couldn't hold a conversation, then 60–90 seconds of easy movement or rest. Repeat six to eight times, two or three days a week. Pick whichever version fits your body:

- **Stationary bike** — pedal easy for two minutes to warm up, then as hard as you can manage for 30 seconds, coast for 90. Eight rounds and you're done in about 15 minutes.
- **Treadmill** — walk your normal pace, raise the incline for 30 seconds until breathing gets heavy, then drop it back down for 90 seconds of easy walking.
- **A hill or a staircase** — walk up fast enough that talking gets difficult, then come back down slowly. That's one round.
- **Chair stands** — stand up from a sturdy chair and sit back down as many times as you can in 30 seconds, then rest for 90. Same hard-easy pattern, plus leg strength you'll want later.

Hard is relative, and that's the whole point. Your hippocampus can't tell the difference between a hill sprint and a hard set of chair stands.

Even the gentle version does something. A University of Pittsburgh study put 120 older adults on a plain walking program — 40 minutes, three times a week, for a year — and their hippocampus grew about 2 percent. That's real tissue growth from walking.

If you have a heart condition or you've been sedentary for a while, get cleared by your doctor before you go find a staircase. Then go.

2. Guard your deep sleep

Your brain has a plumbing system called the glymphatic system. It runs mainly during deep sleep and flushes waste out of brain tissue — including beta-amyloid, the protein that accumulates in Alzheimer's disease. NIH researchers scanned 20 healthy adults after a normal night of sleep and again after a night with none. Beta-amyloid rose about 5 percent in the hippocampus and thalamus after that single sleepless night.

That's what one bad night does to your brain's cleanup crew.

Aim for seven to eight hours. Same bedtime and same wake time every day, weekends included. No alcohol within three hours of bed — it specifically disrupts deep sleep. Stop eating two to three hours before you lie down.

Three More Worth Adding

These won't do what the big two do, but they're low-effort and the evidence behind them is real.

Eat the fat your brain is built from

Your brain is roughly 60 percent fat, and DHA is the main structural fat in it — built directly into your neurons. Researchers following 1,575 dementia-free Framingham Heart Study participants, average age 67, found that people with the lowest omega-3 levels had measurably smaller brain volume and lower scores on tests of memory, executive function, and reasoning than those with higher levels.

Fatty fish two or three times a week gets you there — salmon, sardines, mackerel, herring. If fish makes you gag, a good fish oil supplement covers the same ground.

Trade one cup for matcha

Matcha is green tea leaves stone-ground into a powder that you whisk directly into water, so you're consuming the whole leaf instead of just what steeps out of it. A 2024 double-blind, placebo-controlled trial gave 99 Japanese adults aged 60–85 two grams of matcha a day for a year. The matcha group got measurably better at reading facial expressions and emotional cues, and showed a promising — though not statistically decisive — trend toward better sleep. It didn't move the needle on the study's primary cognitive test scores, so this isn't a substitute for exercise or sleep. It's a thirty-second swap for something you were going to drink anyway, and it gives you L-theanine and EGCG together, a combination coffee doesn't offer.

Use water around 175°F, not boiling — boiling makes it bitter. A teaspoon of powder in a mug, whisked hard for 15 seconds so it doesn't clump. A cheap milk frother works fine.

Take a cold shower

The easiest thing on this list. When you're done washing, turn the hot water off for 30 to 60 seconds. Cold exposure raises norepinephrine, which runs your focus and attention, and dopamine climbs too, staying elevated for hours afterward.

One real warning: skip this if you have any heart condition or blood pressure issue. The shock of cold water is hard on your cardiovascular system and can be dangerous for someone with an existing condition. Ask your doctor first. If the answer is no, you still have the other four items, and the first two matter more anyway.

Train the Brain Directly

Everything above changes the environment your brain operates in — better blood flow, less inflammation, more repair time. There's a separate lever: exercising the brain itself, the same way you'd exercise a muscle.

This is where **BrainHQ** fits in. It's a structured brain-training program built by Posit Science, led by neuroscientist Dr. Michael Merzenich, one of the researchers whose work established that the adult brain can still rewire itself well into old age. BrainHQ isn't a handful of casual puzzle games — it's more than two dozen adaptive exercises across six domains: attention, memory, brain speed, intelligence, people skills, and navigation. The difficulty adjusts automatically to keep pushing you at the edge of your ability, which is where the research says the real gains happen. It's backed by over 100 published studies, including the NIH-funded ACTIVE trial, one of the largest cognitive training studies ever run.

A session takes less than five minutes and works on a phone, tablet, or computer. It's not going to substitute for movement or sleep — nothing on this list does the job those two do. But as a five-minute daily habit layered on top of the big two, it's a legitimate, well-studied way to keep pressure on the "use it or lose it" side of brain health. Worth a look: [**brainhq.com**](https://brainhq.com).

Pick Two

Not all six. That's the way people fail at this — not laziness, but enthusiasm. You read a list like this, overhaul everything on a Monday, and quit by Sunday.

Pick sleep and movement. Run those two for a month before you add anything else. Once they're actual habits, layer in the smaller ones — the fish, the matcha, the cold water, five minutes of BrainHQ — one at a time.

One More Thing

Some of this is genetics. Some of it is plain hard luck. Nobody's selling a miracle here. But 45 percent is not nothing, and the distance between "irreversible" and "45 percent preventable" is the distance between sitting down and getting up.

You are not too old. The Queensland volunteers were as old as 85 and their brains still answered the bell. Yours is waiting on a signal from you, and it doesn't care what the date on your license says.

"For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind." — 2 Timothy 1:7

Go take a walk. Move fast if you can manage it.

I'm a writer, not a doctor. If you're on blood thinners, managing heart disease, or dealing with any chronic condition, run every bit of this past your physician before changing anything — especially the intensity work and the cold water.

If This Were My Mother Again...

Here's Exactly What We'd Do.

Week One

- ✓ Walk three times. – Initially around the village.
- ✓ Protect sleep. – In bed before midnight, every night. Get up when you wake up.

Week Two

- ✓ Keep Week One. – Expand the walking to around the block
- ✓ Add fish twice. – Sardines on toast for lunch one day, salmon for dinner another.

Week Three

- ✓ Add BrainHQ. – 1 session every morning over your morning coffee.
- ✓ Five minutes is all it takes, the benefits are proven.

Week Four

- ✓ Matcha. – Instead of the morning coffee while you're doing your wake up Brain HQ.

If you enjoy it. – If not, stick with the coffee.

Subsequent Weeks

- ✓ Rinse and repeat. Substitute walking with one of the other exercises as suits your current fitness and mobility level.
- ✓ Socialise. - Socialising, even if they do talk rubbish, is still a good activity.
- ✓ Consistency is the key. – If some days don't quite work out, don't try to double up, just move on to the next day.

One Request

If this guide helped you...

Please don't keep it to yourself.

Most people who need it won't be searching for "brain health."

They'll be worrying quietly after watching a parent decline.

If someone came to mind while you were reading this...

Send it to them.